

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN UPANIṢADIC AGE

It was in the long long hoary past when dawned the first morn of civilization in India which has been very beautifully described by *Rabindra Nath Tagore* in one of his songs to mother India: «Thine the skies where dawned the first bright morn, The hermitage thine where the earliest *Sāmans* were Sung, Thine, too, the forests where went forth sublime, Knowledge, Religion, Stores of Lore Divine »¹.

The Great Masters, the Seers of the Highest truth gave a clarion call to the whole of the Universe to listen to the Secrets of Immortality.

« O Son of Immortals, and those who are in the abode of divinity, listen! I have seen that Great one beyond darkness who bears the effulgence of the sun. It is knowing him only that one can win over death »² (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2/5, 3/8).

The whole system of education in Upaniṣadic age was tuned after this profound call.

The aim of Education: The aim of Education in ancient India was to develop an all round personality in a man. There must not be any contradiction between his inner and outer self. There must not exist any conflict between the society and his self. He should live a balanced and harmonious life. So the aim of education was to awaken in a man desire to know himself in relation to the society and the universe. He was expected to develop his inherent powers through appropriate channels and while doing so he would not only make an attempt to muster strong his capacities to get perfection in his work but also try to discover the latent power of his soul in relation to the eternal self.

This transitory life on the earth is not the whole thing. He is a part of the Absolute. So it is the physical framework of the individual that is subject to change, decay and dissolution. The consciousness which is the inner essence of the individual and which is termed as *Ātman* or *Brahman* does not change nor is subject to death or decay.

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So the whole system of education in ancient India was based on the process of individual's attempt to uplift himself through the wily path of the world by advancing through various schools to the attainment of the knowledge of the Absolute and aimed at producing well-coordinated human beings who would not only think for themselves but for others also:

« *Āhmano hitāya Jagadhitāya ca* »³.

However, modern civilization lacks this awareness.

Type of Education: Once Śaunaka approached the great Sage Angirā and asked him about the types of education: *Kasminnu Bhagavo bijñāte sarvañidam vijñātam bhavatīti*⁴ (1.1.4 *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*). O glorified one, tell me, knowledge of which thing may open the doorway to knowledge of everything in this Universe?

Angirā answered: *DVe Vidyē Veditavye Parā caivāparā ca*⁴: There are two types of education *Parā* and *Aparā*. *Aparā Vidyā* includes the knowledge of all the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas* and any type of education based on science or humanities (i.e. Grammar, Necrology, Arithmetic, Divination, Chronology, Dialectics, Politics, Theology, etc.).

A great scientist may surprise the world by his inventions; a grammarian may confuse the whole house by the magic display of word power; an architect may build up magnificent architectural wonders, but all these come under the category of *Aparā Vidyā*. A man may earn name, fame and all the amenities that the world may give to him by means of *Aparā Vidyā*. However, all those things fetched by *Aparā Vidyā* do not last for ever; they are, as described by Śaṅkarāchārya « *Nalinīdalagata-jalamatitaralam.* »⁶ transitory as the water on a lotus leaf.

Parā Vidyā is that kind of knowledge by means of which the inexhaustible thing is known; *Parā Vidyā* is *Yayā tadakṣaramadhigamyate*. It is the basis of all arts and sciences wherein lies implicit the knowledge of everything. It is the knowledge of the eternal self. Eternal self is the real thing — Noumenon — in every creature of this world.

The acquirement of such *vidyā* (education) as the fundamental requisit for marching towards the ultimate destination of every human life, i.e. towards the eternal peace & bliss and freedom from the cycle of births and deaths.

He is the supreme being, the creator. He is there in the soul of every man, He reveals himself to one who has perception; whoever attains knowledge of him becomes immortal:

*Eṣa Devo Viśwakarmā Mahātmā Sadā Janānām
hṛidaye sanniviṣṭaḥ Hṛidā mañiṣā manasābhi kṛipto
Ya etad viduramṛitāste bhavanti*⁶.

(*Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*)

The procedure: Upanisad sets forth a lifelong curriculum to materialise such a magnanimous plan. The ancient sages considered education as the life process and divided the life of an individual into four stages to each of which different duties were assigned. *Jābāla Upaniṣad* says « *Brahmacārī bhūtṛvā grihī bhavet; grihī bhūtṛvā Vanī bhavet, Vanī bhūtṛvā prabrajat* »⁷. In the first stage a student should observe celibacy and a life under strict discipline; then only he may learn thoroughly whatever his tendency may be with the austerity and devotion of a saint. Such is the power of *Brahmacarya* that in the *Ādiparva* of *Mahābhārata* (66,28) we get the story of *Gayā* to whom *Agni* granted the power to know *Vedas* without study simply as the result of his austerity, chastity, observances, vows and the grace of the *Guru*. Knowledge is such a thing which can be amassed only when a person be very much disciplined in every respect. He must not think of any thing apart from his studies.

Therefore it is said *Chātrāṇām adhyayanam tapaḥ*, for the students study is the only penance.

This phase of life ends when he is twenty five. Then he marries and enters into *grihasthāśrama*. In Upaniṣadic age *grihasthāśrama* was deemed to be the best of all the *āśramas*; because here he would get the opportunity to translate all his learnings into action; « *Yastu Kriyavān puruṣaḥ sa Vidvān* »⁸. This is the golden time for him to serve the society and all those around him. It is the *grihī* who performs the *Pañca Yajña*. That is, he serves his parents, Saints, Gods, other lower creatures and nature. When he reaches fifty, it is the time for him to retire from his worldly life. And then comes the day when he has to leave this worldly abode. He must prepare his mind to face that gruesome reality bravely. It is the time to be in communion with his inner self.

In the fourth stage begins the life of an ascetic. This is the time to acquire the knowledge of *Parā Vidyā* through which he can attain the final fulfilment of his life.

Criteria for being a student: The word *Śiṣya* or disciple is derived from the root *√Sās* which means to rule; the derivative meaning of *Śiṣya* is one who is fit to be ruled. The great sages accepted their pupils only when they were fully satisfied with their eligibility. A pupil, as *Tantra Saraḥ* says:

*Sānto Vinītaḥ Suddhātmā Sraddhāvān Dhāranakṣamaḥ
Samarthaśca Kulīnaśca Prājñāḥ Saccarito Vratī
Evamādigunair yuktaḥ śiṣyo bhavati nānyathā* »⁹.

One who is gentle, meek and humble, who is a pure soul, has reverence, and ability to retain what he learns, is able, highborn, wise, bears a good moral character and observes austerity, he alone is fit to become a disciple. The great teachers in Upaniṣadic time agreed to impart the highest knowledge only after taking very hard tests of their pupils.

When Naciketas asked Yama about the secrets of death, he tried to deviate him from his aim. He placed irresistible allurements before him:

*Ye ye kāmā durlabhā martya-loke
Sarvān Kāmānś chandataḥ Prāthayasva* ¹⁰

« Ask whatever desire you have for even a very rare thing in this world, your wish will be fulfilled at a snap ».

*imā rāmāḥ sarathā saturyāḥ
na hīdriśā lambhanīyā manuṣyaiḥ
ābhirmatprattābhiḥ paricārayasva
Nacitketo maraṇam mānupraksīḥ* ¹⁰

(Kāṭhopaniṣad 1.1.25)

« Have a bevy of extraordinarily beautiful, singing and dancing girls with chariots, have their services for you; but Naciketā, spare me such questions on the secrets of death ».

Then Naciketā answered:

*Śvobhāvā martyasya jadantakaitat
Sarvendriyāṇām Jarayanti Tejaḥ
tavaiva bāhāstavanṛitya-gīte* ¹⁰

(Kāṭhopaniṣad 1.1.26)

« O Lord of death: all these wordly objects of which you are speaking are uncertain; they may not last till tomorrow. The energies of all our senses are burning away. So, keep your horses, songs and dances for you, I dont want them, I only like to have my queries answered ».

So crossing all these impassible hurdles and winning over temptations he (Naciketas) got what he wanted. Yama explained to him the secrets of immortality. The success of Naciketas led the great teachers of *Upaniṣad* to give a clarion call to the suffering humanity:

*Uttiṣṭhata Jāgrata Prāpya Varān nivodhata
Kṣurasya dhārā miśitā duratyayā
durgarḥ pathastat kavayo vadanti* ¹¹

(Kāṭhopaniṣad 1.3.14)

« Rise, awake: have your cherished boon fulfilled. The wise men say that the way to the eternal truth is as sharp as the razor's edge and quite inaccessible ».

Criteria for being a teacher: In this system, education is entirely dependent on *Guru*. He is the helmsman and by his help only the pupil can steer through the boisterous sea of life to the shore of eternal truth. Therefore a teacher need not only be a man of vast learning but also one who has mastered his senses, passions, emotions, etc. through

meditation and religious practices. *Yukti-Kalpataru* is a text ascribed to Bhojadeva of 11th century. It mentions the qualifications required of a teacher as follows:

*Sadācāraḥ Kuśaladhīḥ sarva-śāstrārthapāragah.
nityanaimittikānaṁ kāryaṇām kārakaḥ śuciḥ*¹².

« A teacher should be virtuous, upright and intelligent, proficient in all the *Śāstras*. He performs his daily routine properly and is well-versed in *Vedas*. To acquire all these uncommon virtues he should be ever vigilant and active and always be in touch with what he teaches ».

In his *Mālavikāgnimitram*, Kālidāsa very aptly describes the qualities of a real teacher; he says;

*Śiṣṭā Kṛiyā Kasyacidātmasamsthā
Samkrāntiranyasya viśeṣayuktā
Yashyobhayaṁ sādhu sa śikṣakāṇām dhuri
Pratiṣṭhā payitavya eva*¹³.

(*Mālavikāgnimitram* 1/108)

« One man is at his best when exhibiting his act in person, another has as his special qualification the power of communicating his skill; he who possesses both (these excellences) should be placed at the head of the teacher ».

Really, great is the responsibility of a guru whose task is to pierce the screen of darkness of ignorance and throw open the enlightened chamber of knowledge to his disciple. It is therefore said that *Guru-Kṛipāhi Kevalam*. The grace of Guru is the only means to cross the boisterous sea of ignorance. There are thousands of examples in the *Śāstras* that the grace of Guru alone can render impossible thing possible. But implicit faith in *Guru* is essential in that case.

Moreover, the degree of success to be acquired by the pupil depends entirely upon his worthiness to receive what he is taught.

For, Kālidāsa says:

*Pātra Viśeṣe nyastaṁ gunāntaraṁ vrajati śilpamādhātuh
Jalamiva Samudraśuktau muktā phalatām payodasya*¹⁴.

(*Mālavikāgnimitram* 1/35)

« The skill of a teacher when imparted to a worthy object attains greater excellence as the water of a cloud when dropping into a sea-shell acquires the state of (is converted into) a pearl ».

A *Guru* should instruct his pupil through his own deeds.

*Chaitanya Mahāprabhu*¹⁶ the great God incarnate of 16th century said: *āpani ācari dharma anye sikhāibe*¹⁵. « Teach others after practising it yourself ». One must not teach a subject which he has not mastered himself.

Vocational education: While in teacher's house the students were given training for the job according to their castes or choices. It is not correct to say that professions at that time were based purely on caste distinctions. A Rigvedic verse says (RV IX, 112) I am a poet (Karuh) my father is a physician and my mother a grinder of corn (Upala-prakashini) ».

At that time it was essentially a pastoral civilisation. So the students looked after the cultivation of the land belonging to their respective *Gurus*. The story of *Upamanyu*, who at the behest of his *Guru* laid himself down all through the night to protect the flowing away of the water from the field of his *Guru*, tells us how the students were taught obedience which is very necessary in every walk of our life. The students also looked after their *Guru's* cattle. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* tells us about the great sage *Satyakāma*, who was appointed to take charge of the cattle by his teacher, was able to increase their number from 400 to 1000. Such a type of training taught the students dignity of labour. The Military science was taught by the teacher to the Kṣatriya boys. Under the training of Valmiki Lava and Kuśa the twin sons of *Rāma* became so expert that they defeated *Rāma* and all his brothers when they encountered them in a fight.

Methods of teaching: The great masters were wonderfully practical. They used to teach their disciples through catechism. The great sage *Uddālak Āruni* taught his son *Svetaketu* about the generation of gross object from a subtle one by breaking bunyan fruit and its seeds and the invisibility of existing object by the example of salt, dissolved in a bowl of water (*Chāndyogya Upaniṣad* 6/12/6/13).

Co-education: A girl student observed austerity similar to that of a male *Brahmacārī*.

In Vedic & Upanisadic period boys & girls were treated equally and no distinction however was present in educating them. Women were given equal privileges in higher education too. Girls who dedicated (their whole life to the cause of studies and spiritual pursuits refrained from entering the worldly life and preferred to remain unmarried. Such ladies were known as *Brhmavādīnī*¹⁶. e.g.

*Gārgī Vācaknavī*¹⁶, the famous lady sage who, once at last succeeded in silencing the great *Yājñavalkya*¹⁶ during their catechism held in king Janaka's court; another was *Ghoshā*¹⁶: one of the seers of Veda-Mantra, and many others.

Learned ladies had equal right to study *Vedas* as was particularly assigned to them: i.e. *dwiveda*, *triveda*, *chaturveda*, etc.

The study hour was fixed. When the *Guru* considered his disciple had acquired full proficiency in his or her subject, bathing ceremony was performed and convocation held. Then the disciple became a *Snātaka*¹⁶ or graduate. During the ceremony the *Guru* advised how one

should perform his domestic and worldly duties as is mentioned in *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*: Speak the truth: practise the virtues, etc.¹⁷. Then the disciple entered into the Gṛihasthāśrama.

The place of yajña in education: The performance of a Yajña taught the pupil to mingle the spirit of sacrifice with his desire for enjoyment. There were two kinds of Yajñas in Upaniṣadic religion. In one were sacrificed meat, and nutritive articles, etc. to the fire. This was considered at the time of the Yajña to be an emblem of a particular God or *Paramātmā himself*. Such a Yajña was called *Dravya Yajña*. This sort of Yajña ensured the purification of the atmosphere and was conducive to the physical and mental welfare of the surrounding people. The spiritual benefit acquired was that by daily performance of the offerings of the material objects to God, he learnt to offer every action, the result of the actions and ultimately his egoistic feeling of the doer of the actions to *Paramātmā* with whom every thing of this world is to be merged one day. This was called *Jñāna Yajña* (The sacrifice which leads to the real knowledge or the truth).

Moreover sacrifice at a Yajña means self-sacrifice. It is the self-sacrifice through which a human being achieves the summum bonum of his life, that is eternal peace.

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